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More money to fight wildfires, but no long-term budget fix

CHEYENNE (AP) — Budget legislation headed toward approval by Congress includes an additional \$610 million for the U.S. Forest Service to fight wildfires next year but no long-term fix to how the agency, year after year, has had to borrow money from other programs to keep up with the ever-growing cost of fighting fires.

‘Congress has to face and solve this problem. Because if we don’t, the Forest Service is going to become the fire service.’

Robert Bonnie
Undersecretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture

The Forest Service spent a record \$1.7 billion fighting fires this year. Firefighting now accounts for more than half of the agency’s budget, up from 16 percent 20 years ago.

The Obama administration wants to address the Forest Service’s firefighting budget shuffle by treating wildfires like other types of natural disasters for funding purposes. The proposal, however, didn’t make it into the budget legislation the House and Senate plan to vote on Friday.

Paying for wildfires the same way the government responds to hurricanes and tornadoes needs more review, said Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, chairwoman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

One potential problem: A destructive tornado or hurricane is a single event, while a nasty fire season is series of events, some much worse than others. The tipping point at which federal disaster relief would be warranted for wildfires in any given year could be difficult to gauge.

“I believe the administration’s proposal could set a bad precedent, prove unworkable, and fall short of its own goals,” Murkowski said in a news release this week.

SEE WILDFIRES, PAGE 2

Diversity still an issue on UW campus

BY PHOEBE TOLLEFSON
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SHERIDAN — The University of Wyoming officials tout a long list of initiatives aimed at fostering diversity.

Employment recruiters attend out-of-state conferences and advertise job openings nationwide in an attempt to reach more diverse applicant pools. The school has hosted

a mentorship program for incoming freshmen from racial minorities since 1997. It offers academic concentrations or classes in Latino, American Indian and African-American studies. Students who wish to file a discrimination complaint can do so with the diversity and employment practices office.

Sara Axelson, vice president for student affairs, said the school emphasizes not just racial and ethnic diversity, but diversity of

ability, veteran status and sexual orientation.

Yet despite these attempts to make campus more inclusive, Marlin Holmes, former president of the Association of Black Student Leaders, said that when he arrived on campus as a graduate student, he did not feel he was offered the support he needed.

“No, I had to find it on my own,” he said.

SEE DIVERSITY, PAGE 8



JUSTIN SHEELY | THE SHERIDAN PRESS

Thirsty cowboy out of luck

Ice hangs from a sculpture Thursday in Whitney Commons Park. In the summertime the sculpture is a working fountain that pours water from the cowboy’s hat. Frigid temperatures and an icicle gave the impression that the thirsty cowboy was out of luck.

WYOMING TOURISM 2015 looks to be another good year

CHEYENNE (AP) — This year looks to be a “banner year” for Wyoming’s tourism industry, providing good fiscal news to a state looking at severe drops in revenue because of the downturn in minerals extraction, a state tourism official said.

Diane Shober, executive director of the state Office of Tourism, said Thursday that the final numbers on Wyoming’s 2015 tourism are still being compiled, but an improved national economy, increased travelers, lower gasoline prices and well-executed marketing efforts give her reason for optimism.

Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks and other major attractions in the state saw big increases in visitation over the summer months, Shober said.

While a few areas of the state had lower hotel occupancy, Teton and Park counties, where 50 percent of all the state’s hotels are located, had record years, she said.

SEE TOURISM, PAGE 2

‘Star Wars: The Force Awakens’ thrills fans, sets records

LOS ANGELES (AP) — After months of secrecy and anticipation, “Star Wars: The Force Awakens” is thrilling fans and theater owners alike.

The most anticipated film in the galaxy opened globally Thursday, setting international and pre-sale box-office records and delighting moviegoers who’ve had opening-night tickets in hand for months.

Kelly Andrews, who wears her love of “Star Wars” on her skin in the form of

Yoda and R2-D2 tattoos, bought tickets in October for the first showing at Hollywood’s classic TCL Chinese Theatre, where the original “Star Wars” premiered in 1977.

“It was outstanding,” she said as she left the screening Thursday night clutching a shiny keepsake popcorn bin. “I cried happy tears. I cried sad tears. It was beautiful.”

SEE FORCE, PAGE 3



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Star Wars fan James Granun shows off his stormtrooper helmet and Chewbacca Christmas sweater during the opening night of “Star Wars: The Force Awakens” on Thursday.



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